

Sketch

Volume 65, Number 2

2001

Article 37

Rules (On Writing)

Nora Wendl*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2001 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Rules (On Writing)

Alphabetically, and chronologically, it all starts with the letter 'k.' The *silent* of the twin 'k's. When it precedes 'n', it loses audible identity, the loser of some highly political consonant coup. Majority favor always falls on the letter (n) that lives further burrowed into the alphabet.

If I failed to learn it quickly, I did at least learn it early. There is no logical way to pronounce the 'k' with the 'n', so just lose it. Lose it somewhere in your mother's broad, warm lap. Let the letter slide somewhere in between the bright folds of the thick yellow comforter. Lost in the light scent of hand lotion that cannot quite cover the odor of roast beef on thin flesh. "Nuh..."

Don't wait for a reason.

Don't follow Grandma around all day, tugging at the faded blue folds on her pre-makeup 'house dress.'

Don't drag your large hard-backed, fully illustrated children's book on the floor behind you, bending the pages and dog-eared the cover.

Don't let the serpentine vacuum cord claim your fat little legs as Grandma turns around, her mouth a little red 'oh!'

Don't stop her in her tracks, a cease-fire on the lint-siege to demand an answer.

Do not shift the parallel rows of high-powered mechanical rug-sucking, to ask 'why.'

This isn't about 'y,' anyway. It's about 'k.'

You are just barely four. You've got a mouth that runs faster than anyone's.

You demand an answer *now*. *How can a letter be silent?*

There is an exasperation in the old woman's voice.

The freshly painted-on eyebrows assume a dangerous arch. Dagger-like. Geisha-dragon-woman in a weird oriental print.

"Honey, just because. It just *is* silent. No, don't say it. Pretend it isn't there. Just say the word like that first letter never existed. Good."

What a good girl. The rules don't always need explaining.

Grandpa comes home, and the house is loving, silent. Grandma continues the work.

The housework is pronounced, as though she were never there. Towels mysteriously folded perfectly, sharp.

Roast beef in the air like it's a season, like it's spring in the middle of December.

Like silent 'k.' No reason. Just *is*.

What a polite girl.

Always say *'thank you.'*

Pronounce the k. It's at the end, for once, not putting itself first. Recognize it.

Grammar and culture intersect here.

You lose teeth. They move to make way for larger, sharper, meat-cutting ones. Meat-cutting teeth are good for animals, and bad for you, learning how to read, and proving yourself out loud.

You can't say 's.' The importance of the second tooth in your upper jaw has until now escaped you. Something has stolen away your 's' capability, and has left you a whistle. Tomorrow, you are to play the not-quite title role of Mother Cat in the kindergarten play of 'Three Little Kittens (Who Lost their Mittens)'. Humiliating.

Reading aloud is now a tortuous labor, with the silent letters and high-pitched whistles.

You want your letter 's' back, not the vulgar noise.

You improvise lines, avoid the 's' sound as you stand before parents and grandparents, and one drooling little brother in the middle of the big yellow square that, painted on the shabby slate-colored carpet, is a stage.

"You naughty kitten...you lost your mitten...And you sh*whistle*—can have no pie."

Much to the befuddlement of Ms. Simon, whom, as of late, you avoid addressing. You just pull on her skirt for attention now.

Writing. If reading is a tortuous labor, writing is a hydra-headed snake that bites you when you aren't paying attention—when your pencil is dull or idle.

The sounds that you have just lately managed to force into the surrounding air...you learn that they have a graphic manifestation. Symbols for sound.

There is no logic. You won't be told the history of these letters for years. Now is a simple exercise in memorization.

Do write capital letters at twice the height of undercase letters.

SKETCH

Do use punctuation. There is a period for the end of sentences, a comma for the middle.

Do use straight lines. Nevermind that when pronouncing these words, your tongue becomes rubber, twisting around to form them. When they're on paper, they're straight.

Do not divorce a word of itself. If it does not fit on a line, go to the next. Nevermind the empty gap where the word almost fits there at the end of the first line. Go to the second.

Do not write with a dull pencil. Nevermind when you stabbed yourself in the thumb with an over-sharpened pencil, bled and cried. Sharper is neater.

These letters are your responsibility. They are yours when you put them on the page, nobody else's. Grandma can vacuum around them, but not touch them.

Mom can read them, but not change them.

Grandpa can appreciate them, but if he tries to hang his hat on them, it will fall.

They are solid. They are yours.

I no longer ask why grammar rules...are. I know they just *exist*, that they form a sort of ethereal surface that floats undetected in our atmosphere.

Nora Wendl is a student of Architecture (yes, capital A) at Iowa State University. She has, much to the chagrin of her advisor, been taking some English classes lately. These are (artistically embellished) Nonfiction.